IN FOREIGN AFFAIRS: He Is Searching for Ways To Deal With Rapidly Developing Crises

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WASHINGTON, Feb. 1—Somehow, in a weak moment this last month, Lyndon Johnson must have turned from his domestic labors to ask how the world outside was spinning. Whereupon the gods of tumult let him have it: A quick reprise of all the Kennedy woes, and then some.

Another coup in Vietnam. Another wintry dose of Charles de Gaulle. Poignant reminder of Pandit Nehru's frailty. Some frustrating samples of Fidel Castro's buoyancy. A major anti-Yanqui brawl with Panama. A minor Arab rally against Israel. A ripple of trouble in Laos. A wave of riot in Africa. Another plane incident with the Russians. Another disarmament bout with the Russians. More of Dr. Sukarno and a threat of war over Malaysia. Crisis in Cyprus and a threat of war in the Aegean. And the British among others, hollering for help from Uncle.

Small Comfort

Most of the trouble, of course, does not now touch the vital interests of the United States or any of the other major powers. But that is small comfort. It may, in fact, be making the issues more troublesome; in diplomacy, as in everything else, men have a way of fighting for stubborn principle when they are not fighting for their lives.

Much of the trouble is not particularly Washington's fault. Certainly not President Johnson's fault. Gradually and reluctantly, now here, now there, the United States is inheriting the headaches of the former colonial domains, including its own.

But all the trouble does raise—at least, it will not let lie—some nagging questions about Western policy in almost every corner of the world. Washington's refusal or inability to deal with them has often left it navigating without compass, a handicap for which President Kennedy tried to compensate with manual dexterity and force of personality. How Mr. Johnson will manage, remains to be seen.

Tormenting Question

How to cope with an adversary and how to manage an alliance while relative power declines is another of those tormenting questions that Mr. Johnson, like Mr. Kennedy, will have to contemplate.

Much of Europe feels free to recognize Peking, to trade with Dr. Castro and to compete for the privilege of giving long-term credits to the Soviet Union, no matter how Washington rails against aid to the enemy.

So far, however, the protests have tended only to advertise American restraint, with the risk that others interpret it as impotence.

Here is another of those agonizing questions that will inevitably weigh upon the new President and which ought to trouble all those who would toy with him, in Panama, Pemba or Paris. Will he be tempted by retaliation or by forms of isolation? Logic might say no, but that is not the only valid measure of the office and the man.

There is little doubt that world events this new year have overwhelmed the fledgling Administration. Mr. Johnson began the year with the hope that he could do first what he could do best, push the Kennedy program through Congress, add a measure of his own and ready himself and his party for the political wars. The largely domestic State of the Union message suggested his state of mind.

Hopes and Expectations

Crisis upon crisis caught important advisers out of the country; Secretary of State Rusk in Asia for a few days, John McCone of the C. I. A. in Europe, McGeorge Bundy, the White House foreign affairs supervisor, on holiday. Their absence did not aggravate the crises, but it did indicate this city's hopes and expectations.

Mr. Johnson clearly has not had time to find his way among his own advisers on foreign affairs. Time and again he has turned to some of his old colleagues in the Senate, too much so, some of them fear, because their suggestions were at times narrow in perspective while their conclusions differed along predictable lines.

These consultations have, for the moment, replaced the old Kennedy "seminar," the wide-ranging bull sessions among a dozen or more respected officials, irrespective of title.

That is how the late President broadened his perspective and tried out more historical, even philosophical, theories on world affairs. Eventually, Mr. Johnson, too, will find his ways of escaping the day-to-day spasms to train his eyes on more distant goals.

Clearly his priorities are to keep after Congress, to keep atop of world events and to win an election; and he is working hard on these objectives—some say too hard for a man with a weak heart.

He is said to have kept himself closely informed on all major world problems, calling for especially long intelligence briefings to fill the gaps in his knowledge. He deals most often with Secretary Rusk, Mr. Bundy and Secretary of Defense McNamara, in small meetings and by telephone—always the telephone — all day long and often until after midnight.

Johnson's Approach

There is criticism here of Mr. Johnson's approach to foreign policy, but it takes different forms. Some say they sense no direction in his approach to world affairs and no order in their management. Some say this is because Mr. Bundy now plays a lesser role. Some say it is because Mr. Rusk has not taken charge of the State Department and its policies with sufficient force.

Much of that criticism, although not all, comes from men still bound emotionally to Mr. Kennedy and some of them are frankly unable to adjust to the new personality in the White House. Some of their memories are short, as well, for their criticism overlooks the early Kennedy disasters, at the Bay of Pigs, in the Vienna meeting with Premier Khrushchev and at the Berlin Wall.

Panama Dispute

Even some admirers of President Johnson believe that he was too rigid too quickly in the semantic quarrel with Panama about new negotiations. But the problem itself, they rightly suggest, is a legacy from the Kennedy Administration and of 60 years of emotion in both countries.

On other issues, such as reaction to General de Gaulle, there has been some customary confusion, nothing new or unique in this capital. In the unexpected crises, the Administration as a whole has functioned, as before, with reasonable speed and effectiveness.

It is as the author rather than the manager of foreign policy that Mr. Johnson is not yet known here. How—indeed whether—he handles the underlying questions, how he resolves the conflicts among commitments, how he attracts and finally uses men of intelligence and vision — these things will tell. But not soon. If the world really wants to know, it might well emulate the Soviet example, of all things, and keeps its shirt on.